

WALKING INTO THE HOME office of Timur Bekmambetov, the filmmaker behind *Wanted*, *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* and the upcoming *Ben-Hur* (Aug. 19), one wouldn't expect to find a shrine to Walt Disney. After all, the Kazakhstan-born filmmaker first made his mark with the creepy, visually inventive R-rated horror fantasy *Night Watch*, which became Russia's highest-grossing film in 2004. He followed that with the sequel *Day Watch* (which topped its predecessor) before his first American film — 2008's Angelina Jolie vehicle *Wanted* — earned \$341.4 million worldwide. But today, the director-producer lives in Disney's former Los Feliz property and has filled it with sketches of animated characters and a custom pingpong table featuring Mickey Mouse figurines. "He was a visionary man. He invented a whole world," says Bekmambetov, 55, of Disney. Bekmambetov is attempting to create a whole world with his most expensive film to date, *Ben-Hur*, Paramount and MGM's nearly \$100 million-budget adaptation of Lew Wallace's 1880 novel. And he hopes to escape the shadow of the 1959 adaptation with Charlton Heston that grossed nearly 10 times its \$15 million budget (\$124 million in today's dollars). Along with directing, Bekmambetov, who is married to costume designer Varvara Avdyushko and has two daughters, not only produces movies in the U.S. (such as 2015's social media-centered *Unfriended*, which cost



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"Filmmaking is not only about telling good stories, it's about inventing new languages," says Bekmambetov, photographed June 9 at his home office in Los Angeles.

Timur's Huge in Russia

The filmmaker has directed or produced four of the country's 10 top-grossing films

TITLE	YEAR	DIRECTOR	RUSSIAN B.O.
<i>Stalingrad</i>	2013	Fyodor Bondarchuk	\$52M
<i>Irony of Fate: The Sequel</i>	2007	Timur Bekmambetov	\$50M
<i>Christmas Trees 3</i>	2013	Olga Kharina*	\$37.8M
<i>Admiral</i>	2008	Janik Fayziyev	\$34.5M
<i>Viy</i>	2014	Oleg Stepchenko	\$34.1M
<i>Day Watch</i>	2006	Timur Bekmambetov	\$31.9M
<i>Three Knights at the Distant Shores</i>	2012	Kostantin Feoktistov	\$31.1M
<i>Night Watch</i>	2004	Timur Bekmambetov	\$30M
<i>Legend No. 17</i>	2013	Nikolai Lebedev	\$29.3M
<i>The Best Movie</i>	2008	Kirill Kuzi	\$27.5M

*Produced by Bekmambetov. Source: Box Office Mojo

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Timur Bekmambetov

The Russian filmmaker and visual effects guru on why he lives in Walt Disney's old home, how the studio system is 'like the Titanic,' virtual reality movies and how his ambitious *Ben-Hur* remake is nothing like Charlton Heston's chariot race By Rebecca Ford

just \$1 million and grossed \$64 million worldwide, and STX's recent first-person shooter *Hardcore Henry*) but also makes films in Russia, where he runs the visual effects production company and studio Bazelevs. That company recently opened its first U.S. office (plus one in China), making Bekmambetov's business truly global.

Where do you spend most of your time?

I'm everywhere because of the internet. When it's midnight in Los Angeles, it's 10 o'clock in the morning in Moscow. So I'm finishing my working day here, and then people wake up in Moscow, and I'm Skyping calls because I'm producing and directing in Russia. And now we've opened the office in Beijing.

What's the purpose of a China office?

It happened by accident. We made a movie in Russia called *He Is Dragon*. It was not successful in Russia. Suddenly, maybe three months after the Russian release, I got a call that said the movie is all over the internet [in China], pirated. It's the story about how a young girl falls in love with a dragon-man. And girls in China fell in love with this dragon-man. We sent the producer to China,

and he met all the distributors, and they decided to release it theatrically, and now they make sequels. So this was the reason to open a small office in China.

Was it intimidating to take on an iconic story in remaking *Ben-Hur*?

It was scary. It's a great, great book. It's very unique because it's a fictional version of the biblical story. It's very rare when you have material with a message. And at the same time, it's very entertaining because of the unbelievable naval battles and chariot races. But I like to take a risk and do something nobody wants to try. The 1959 movie is not the same as the book, which has a very different message. The book was written about forgiveness, and the movie they made in 1959 — a great movie — it's about revenge and miracles. Our movie is different.

How did you find your lead, Jack Huston?

Jack Huston came to read Messala's lines. After I met him, I called the studio and said, "I think we found Judah." And it was very symptomatic that he likes Messala's character because in this movie, Messala and Judah are both likable. It's not good boy versus bad boy.



They're not fighting with each other; they're both fighting with fate, with fate testing them, testing their love, their brotherhood. When we found Jack, it was really easy to pick Toby Kebbell because he was the perfect opposite.

You were extremely in-demand after *Wanted* but decided to keep working in Russia rather than do a sequel or Hollywood films. Why? Because I'm always looking to do something different. If I don't know how to do things, it's a signal to me that I must try. And I'm trying to find projects that are unconventional, as a director and as a producer. It's how we produced the movie *Unfriended* two years ago and *Hardcore Henry* this year. I'm doing it because I'm enjoying the creative process, and if it's challenging and I have a possibility to discover something for myself, then that's a reason to do it. I'm still doing Russian movies because it's my audience, and it's just a pleasure to make something the people like.

***Unfriended* presented a new type of filmmaking, with the entire story taking place on computer screens. Do you think there's a future in the screen-capture film format?** Yes, we're focusing on the screen-capture

format because it's something unique we discovered. I hope the *Unfriended* sequel will be done this year. And we made a comedy called *Liked*. It's unbelievable; it's a Cyrano de Bergerac story in the internet world, about a boy helping his friend deal with a girl. What I'm trying to do is to generate as many projects in this format and to understand how to make them. We also are producing *Romeo and Juliet* in the screen-capture format. It'll be Shakespeare lyrics in the typing and chatting.

What do you think of virtual reality?

It's very difficult to have a narrative structure, but it's possible. And unfortunately, I cannot explain it in words. I can only make it, and I think soon we will make a virtual reality movie.

Do you have specific plans for a VR movie?

Yes. *Hardcore* was the first step toward this language.

Why do visual effects cost so much, and do you feel that costs can be brought down?

1 Bekmambetov had a custom pingpong table made, complete with Mickey Mouse figurines.

2 A poster for one of his favorite films, the 1973 French film *Le Magnifique*. "I like when a film is both human and spectacular," says Bekmambetov.

3 A notebook from the Italian studio Cinecittà, where Bekmambetov shot *Ben-Hur*. The 1959 *Ben-Hur* also was shot at the studio, along with many of Federico Fellini's films.

4 A creature from the Russian movie *He Is Dragon*, which became one of the most pirated movies in China, with more than 3.7 million downloads in just three days.

They cost so much because of the quality. It's very easy to make, like, if you will measure quality in percentage, up to 95 percent. But the last 5 percent will cost 10 times more. That's why there are only a few people in the world who know how to do that part, and it costs a lot. It's not because of computers and render farms — it's cheap today. It's more about people and technology. But it should cost less, I agree.

What's the toughest part of being a producer in this industry?

To figure out what you really want to do. Because if you know what you really want to do, you'll be successful at it. If you don't really know, then you will fail, or maybe somebody will [have to] help you to survive it. It's a creative process; a producer is a creator. You need to figure out what you really want. What do you really love?

What technology did you need to make *Unfriended*?

It's almost impossible to cut a screen-capture movie with traditional software because you have 18 video layers. In Russia, I have an IT startup because every time I'm making a unique movie, I have unique problems. So we developed a new software to cut screen-capture movies. We also created software that translates text into animation.

What's the biggest challenge of making films in Russia?

Their market is not big enough. And more than 80 percent of the market is American movies in Russia. There are not enough theaters; they're only in the big cities. So that's why the theatrical audience is very specific. There are no American TV shows, it's almost all Russian, but in the theaters, it's mostly Hollywood movies. So it's a competition, and for Russian movies with a budget 10 or 20 times smaller than American movies, it's very difficult to compete. Because at the end of the day, it's about spectacle, and the money means a lot.

What do you find the most frustrating about making a Hollywood studio movie?

It'll change soon, but the old-fashioned studio system is still like a big Titanic. It's very solid, but it's absurd for our time ... when people are using Facebook, when a 17-year-old girl can take pictures of herself or a video and get 10 million views in five days. She is a studio; she can do more than any studio. **THR**